What time is it?

The Soviet Empire is in shambles. Pick up any newspaper today; watch the morning, midday, evening, late night news — the announcements are inescapable — and you will witness, up close and personal, reports of a society profoundly dysfunctional, listing on the edge of chaos. Gorby wins the Nobel prize! But can he salvage his political economy? Will he last? Will the nation?

Most of us have been riveted by such news, by the sights and sounds of walls ripped apart and flooded over by an angry, impatient humanity, unwilling to live by dissembling myths of the past, to live with the worsening perils of the moment.

The Eastern Bloc crumbles, and millions of Americans watch — at once riveted and, reassuringly, cocooned by their belief that the Soviets have finally arrived at an inexorable fate, while we, the victors, stand tall and intact, the armor of American might — and ideology — gleaming radiantly throughout the world for others, at best, to emulate, and at least, to defer to.

Few Americans have noticed — in part because our popular media have scarcely bothered to inform us — that here at home, our walls, too, are profoundly fractured and crumbling, that just as the Second World is on the verge of overdue collapse, so is the First.

What time is it?

The mythology of America, the myth of what it means to be an American, is facing, at last, its own inexorable fate. For what this myth required, for too long, for too many of us, was the soul-crushing negation of our lives, the rejection of our most intimate,
deepest, life-sustaining truths. The mytholo-
gy of America always demanded of its devo-
tees and its victims more than mere assimila-
tion: it forced us to view the best within our-
.selves as the worst. The most precious within
us, that which shaped and nurtured our dis-
tinctive characters, our identities, we jetti-
sioned. For the sake of cultural conversion
—or better still, conformity — to the status
quo, we paid a price, and are paying it still,
with currencies of self—abuse, self—hatred,
alienation, violence, isolation, silence, and
brutal death. The price has been measured
in our spiritual devastation — and our
blood. And the reason America’s walls are
finally crumbling is simply this: we are no

With it, you see, arrives my freedom, my too
long delayed, my truest emancipation.

Now, I ask,

what time is it?

Lest our Harvard hosts misunderstand, it is
not your buildings, schools, and houses of
authority I want to burn, or bring down; it is
your authority, as such, to dictate my life, my
history, my status within the world, your
authority, which must be broken. Your
house can stand, as long as it’s understood
to be my house, too, so that I, too, can fur-
nish its learned interior, remodel and
repaint it, and add new, more colorful wings
should — or better yet, when — the old
ones collapse.

Fifteen years ago, I admit, I told a different
time. As an undergraduate at this institu-
tion, I was as much a prisoner as a student.
Like most others, I had come here to learn,
but foremost, I had come in search of com-
munity, of people like myself — the young,
gifted, and Black; Nina’s song was my
anthem then — who shared my values and
concerns, my intellectual and political com-
mitments. I had come to Harvard, naively, in
search of my own Black reflection. I awak-
ened, after I arrived, to the realization that I
was also gay. And the reflection of myself
that this new me suggested, this reflection I
found nowhere. Worse, I believed it existed
— nowhere.

There were no lesbian/gay studies then. There
were no bisexual/lesbian/gay stu-
dents’ associations. There were no “out” fac-
ulty, to my knowledge, nor conferences or
seminars that addressed, in the remotest way,
the turmoil or the raging questions within
me. There was no In the Life, or Other
Countries, or Looking for Langston, or Tongues
Untied, or Gay Men of African Descent.
Nothing ostensibly “gay” seemed to embrace
the totality of me; nothing “black” did either.
Most days, at lunch and dinner, over the course of my freshman year, I self-consciously surveyed the dining hall, steered a course beyond the anonymous rows of young white animated faces, among whom I clearly did not belong; moved further still beyond the cluster of “Black Tables,” where I knew deep down, no matter how much I masqueraded, my true self would show and would be shunned; and sat, often alone, eating quickly, hurrying my exit from a room where all eyes, I felt, condemned me with unspoken contempt: misfit, freak, faggot.

Beneath such judgment I did as millions have done before me and since: I withdrew into the shadows of my soul; chained my tongue; attempted, as best as I could, to snuff out the flame of my sexuality; assumed the impassive face and stiff pose of Silent Black Macho. I wore the mask. I was serving time. For what crime I didn’t know. But I wore the mask, however stiff, confining, suffocating: I served, in rage, pain, and bitter, needless solitude, for three and a half of my undergraduate years, ignorant that there could be any other way.

What time was it?

Certainly not “Nation Time,” not for this young, gifted, Black — and queer! — student. No nation, however revolutionary, had dared claim me. No revisionist history, Black, Marxist, or otherwise, dared mention my name.

Whose time was it?

Certainly not my time! Despite Douglass, Tubman, Sojourner, DuBois, Garvey, Langston, Rustin, Ella, Eldridge, Angela, Martin, Malcolm, Stokeley, and Jesse, my time, back then, had decidedly not arrived. No prophets of revolution spoke to me, spoke of me. The Last Poets did not mention my name. The New Nationalists, on the rare occasion they acknowledged my existence at all, spoke of me with utter contempt, spat and twisted my name like the vilest obscenity.

Dutifully, nevertheless, I attended classes, in search of something more than knowledge or scholarship — in search of a history, a culture that spoke to my life. A history and culture that, simply, talked to me.

Because of this search I began a lesson, in truth, I’ve never stopped learning: when nobody speaks your name, or even knows it, you, knowing it, must be the first to speak it. When the existing history and culture do not acknowledge and address you — do not see or talk to you — you must write a new history, shape a new culture, that will.

By the winter of my senior year in college, I learned to speak: my name. At first it was just a whisper. Yet it was not the words I uttered that were most important, but the will to utter them: I am young, Black, and gifted, and gay: from this knowledge, this quiet certainty, I shall not — must not — be moved.

Intent on knowing more about what being gay meant, not so much in the present tense but, typically for me then, in the past, I petitioned my department for a special independent course of study. I asked for an in-person interview with the chair. I did not explain beforehand how “special” my study
ars, I found it odd, would say the word “gay,” or even “homosexual.” For the first time in my Harvard experience, indirection and ignorance were passed off as virtues.

Still, I continued to look, and eventually, I found him. Not an eminent professor, but a teaching assistant, an inveterate graduate student with a long-overdue, unfinished dissertation on Walt Whitman — a teacher, by Harvard standards, far beneath the first rank. Yet he was the best this institution ever offered me. For one simple reason: the history and culture he sought to share with me, at last, spoke to my life. Talked to me! And to my youthful amazement, what I heard in the resonances of this new, living history gave strength and clarity to my own maturing voice.

Now, not only could I read and see and hear the past, discovering new relevance, significance unimagined, but I could also, in turn, speak to this past, and thus re-animate and re-shape it, define it anew. I had begun learning, without conscious intent, the fine and powerful art of Signifyin’.

Paul Alan Marx, advisor, mentor, friend, shaped my life in ways I’m sure he never imagined. Paul Marx is dead. Last year. AIDS. I consecrate this moment to his irrepressible spirit, which even now animates my own, and always will, until I someday join him.

When I consider Paul’s life, his death, I perform reflect on the question: what time it was when I first learned to speak, and what time it is now when so many are so intent to once again silence me, by any means necessary.

For the power of Voice which I belatedly learned twelve years ago was the same power that multitudes of Americans — the true silent multicultural majority — also discovered, and have effectively used, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. That unprecedented social upheaval liberated the living
attacks on the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibits; the federal impounding of all slides, negatives, and stills of a San Francisco photographer, internationally acclaimed for his nude portfolio; the arrest and trial of the rap group 2 Live Crew.

Consider: the escalating harrassment of other Black male rappers whose songs boast aggressively political and sexually explicit lyrics; and who have thus drawn the wrath of the government, which now shamelessly deploys the police, the law, the courts to control rap and confine it to a Black cultural ghetto — yet another sorry testament to America’s chronic, pathological obsession

Our communities are robbed ... by the loss of every man, woman, and child who spent a lifetime learning to speak his or her true, proper name...

with, and persecution of, the mythic Big Black Dick.

Consider: the censorship cesspool that engulfed the National Endowment for the Arts, and near fatally poisoned it; Congress’s legislative presumption that “homoeroticism equals obscenity”; and not least, the Endowment’s all too ready willingness to offer progressive, politically engaged artists as sacrificial fodder to appease the blood-lusting Right.

Consider this, and witness conservative/fundamentalist America’s ever more desperate attempts not simply to restore “traditional
values,” but to bludgeon us back into historic cells of solitude, shame, and silence.

What time is it?

It is a paradoxical time of our growing collective strength and the continuing, massive public indifference to our struggles — an indifference that is more than simple apathy, but is rather a willful ignorance and contempt of our lives. It is a time of arrogant indifference, in the midst of AIDS, that kills. An attitude that sanctions, if not secretly applauds, the deaths of thousands, the needless dying of millions. And the consequence of such indifference? Our communities are robbed, not so much through the regular, warlike attrition of our best and brightest, but by the loss of every man, woman, and child who spent a lifetime learning to speak his or her true, proper name, and was cut short in this profound and noble act of self-articulation.

What time is it?

It is a time when dykes and faggots are knifed and bludgeoned, too often with impunity, by night and by day, in our own neighborhoods. A time when queer blood runs loose and wild along the curbside. Yet in such savage attacks, the weight of the crime lies less on the teenaged bigot who wields the bat, the brick, the razor, than on the society whose values, laws, education — and religion — systematically sanction the obscenity of hate-motivated violence.

What time is it?

Some might say “Queer Nation Time!” But that would be premature, because we still inhabit an age when the laws of the state remain intrinsically designed to safeguard the privileges of whiteness, maleness, and procreative heterosexuality. Challenge this world view in any serious, loud, effective way and you risk being cast as a social and criminal outlaw: you risk the outrage and retribution of the State.

Ask the millions embattled by HIV and AIDS what time it is — the millions who regularly clock their dwindling T-cell counts, their diminishing stock of increasingly ineffective AZT, their few, limited alternatives. *Ask these millions* who must clock their draining resources — mental, physical, financial — and must bear the outrage of government and civic leaders who proclaim “compassion for the unfortunate AIDS victims” while systematically undercutting the funding and authority of agencies that could make a difference. *Ask us* — about this profoundly private and public disaster, and what you will hear with the force of a slap is this:

We are in a state of siege. Our lives (people of color, queers, the politically "deviant") are being systematically locked away in closets, in prisons, in caskets. Our boldest, most life-affirming voices are systematically being silenced by spiritual fatigue, and by slow, agonizing death.

Therefore, whenever we speak the truths of our lives, our words must be more than mere words: Every time we speak, we must engage in the most radical — as in fundamental — form of self-affirmation. As com-
munities historically oppressed through silence, through the power of Voice we must seize our freedom, achieve our fullest humanity. Because of this ongoing political, social, and psychological dynamic we have fundamentally redefined Descartes’s principle of self-cognition:

“I speak, therefore I am.”

We speak, creating a world that speaks, in turn, to us. Thus we affirm our right and our fight to live.

We are on the brink, I believe, of a New Nation Time. A nation unlikely to be seen until the next century, but coming nonetheless, in which notions of identity — based on gender, race, sexuality or nationality — will explicitly embrace multiple subjectivities of human experience and points of view.

What we as cultural theorists, historians, activists, and students of social change are now challenged with is not just combatting the ideological Right, — whose “consensus” is crumbling, and whose days are decidedly numbered, no matter how much they posture, pray, bash, and sue. Our greatest challenge rests in finding a language, a way of communicating across our subjectivities, across difference, a way of navigating the cultural borders between and within us so that we do not replicate the chauvinism and reductive mythologies of the past.

This is no easy task.

An all too frequent and unfortunate pattern among peoples achieving social empowerment is their predisposition to reformulate social hierarchies so that they now become privileged while others are oppressed. The system of hierarchy remains intact; only the relative placement of the groups changes.

The burden of today’s historical moment, when identities worldwide are radically reformulating, is for us to speak to and with each other, across the borders of cultural identity, across insidious barriers of class and academic training, in ways at times merely honest and inquiring as well as provocative and sharply critical. We must create a cultural language, a notion of identity, which appreciates difference yet escapes the tragic pitfalls of outsider/insider, and the resultant tendency toward an exclusivist subjectivity, toward an uncritical essentialism. Again, this will be no easy task.

Thus far we have opted, for the most part, for a simplistic multiculturalism, a polite, deferential appreciation and respect for cultural pluralism — “diversity” — without developing a rigorous discourse that analyzes how multiple subjectivities intersect, compete, and collide.

Perhaps we have failed to do this because it is still very early and many of us have only just learned to speak, to ourselves. But as we contemplate this time in our history and the promise of the time to come, remember the greater work we have to do. For what we do in this dialogue and others like it will decide whether this age is remembered as the advent of a more progressive, inclusive, dynamic construct of humanity or as yet another historical promise, deferred.

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